

Neoist *Interruptus* and the Collapse of Originality

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Tracing the etymology of the word collage and its compound *colle* becomes a fascinating journey that branches out into a number of different directions all emanating from the act of gluing things together. After reading a number of definitions that detail such activities as sticking, gluing, pasting, adhering, and the utilization of substances such as gum (British), rubber cement (US) and fish glue, one comes upon another meaning of a rather different order. In France collage has a colloquial usage to describe having an affair, and *colle* more specifically means to live together or to shack up together.¹ While I lay no great claims to any expertise in the area of linguistic history, I would suggest that this vernacular meaning of *colle* arises when living together would have generated far more excitement than the term, and the activity, generates today. And, while the dictionary definition of the word does not support the interpretation that I am going to suggest here, I would argue that its usage in its original context would have generated a very particular kind of *frisson* that would have been implicitly associated with the act of two people being collaged or glued together, in other words fucking, or to fuck, or simply fuck.

What has this to do with a paper on collage as cultural intervention, you might ask? It's simple really, well relatively. My subject is a late 20th century international avant-garde movement known as the Neoist Cultural Conspiracy (Neoism for short), which I would argue is the last of the historic avant-gardes of the 20th century. Indeed, the Fluxus theorist Henry Flynt acknowledged Neoism (while being careful not to endorse it), as "a genuine Fluxus offshoot" in his 1990 article "Mutations of the Vanguard: Pre-Fluxus, During Fluxus, Late Fluxus."² Neoism, as the name suggests is a "new ism" that in the words of one Neoist consists of "a prefix & a suffix and nothing in between."³ It is precisely this feature of Neoism as having "nothing in between" that has simultaneously allowed it to be constructed as an avant-garde movement, and at the same time to "fuck" with the idea of the avant-garde altogether. Indeed, some Neoists have stated that Neoism is "an attempt to create a situation where a definition of Neoism is impossible."⁴

The emptiness at the heart of Neoism was a clever foil which allowed it to adopt a number of different strategies, occupy simultaneous & contradictory positions, complete the "emptying out" of the 20th century avant-garde tradition and position Neoism as something always in the process of *becoming*. István Kántor, the movement's founder when pressed for a definition of Neoism, responded:

I have thousands of definitions but none of them are good for anything, and perhaps always the *newest* is the best. (my italics).⁵

This paper examines three modes of cultural intervention pioneered by the Neoists, these are: i) the concept of the open popstar, ii) neo-plagiarism, and iii) Smile

magazines. The Neoists attacked traditional ideas of the artist as an autonomous individual as well as the myths of artistic identity, and concepts of authorship and ownership. Through strategies that utilized collective authorship and neo-plagiarism, coupled with the use of collage and accumulation, the Neoists launched their avant-garde attack. This text describes nothing less than, the arc of originality's *detumescence* after Neoism's *interruptus*.

Neoism's beginning takes place with the initial 1976 encounter in Budapest between David Zack, an American writer and artist, and István Kántor, a Hungarian medical student and aspiring pop singer. Zack was visiting Budapest with a traveling art exhibition, and during their conversations Zack outlined his proposal for the creation of an "open popstar," who's name would be Monty Cantsin. A year later Kántor had emigrated to Montreal and subsequently visited Zack, who was living in Portland, Oregon. This visit confirmed Kántor's new identity as Monty Cantsin "open popstar". This concept was predicated on the idea that if everyone performed under the same name (Monty Cantsin) they could collectively author the identity and reputation of Monty Cantsin, save themselves the time and effort involved in establishing their own "names", further the cause of Neoism, and bask in the glow of collective stardom. This democratized model of pop stardom arose from Zack's desire to create a structure through which "people can share their art power."⁶ Thus, Monty Cantsin is constituted as an ongoing collage of all the actions & activities performed in his name. In no time at all the use of the name Monty Cantsin spread beyond the creation of a collective popstar to a more generalized artistic identity. This use of multiple people using the same name has come to be known as "multiple names." The multiple names strategy embodies a critique and program aimed at thwarting capitalism's construction and reification of the individual. As Kántor later commented, "by giving the same name to different people we create a kind of confusion that makes control impossible—because everybody has the same name there is no control possible."⁷ Another Neoist stated, "it is in Power's interest that each individual has a unique name, thus making them easily identifiable. Without these classifications Power cannot control because it cannot differentiate, divide and isolate."⁸

Upon Kántor's return to Montreal he formed the Neoist movement. Of its birth he wrote, "there was a name, and I said "let's give it a try," and whatever comes out will be called neoism."⁹ Neoism's manifesto declares that it has no manifesto. Despite its etymological basis in 'newness,' Neoism refuses to generate new objects or ideas, and its strategy is based upon a neo-plagiarist model in which previously extant activities and ideas are utilized to fill up Neoism's "in-between" in order to move it forward. Kántor elaborates on this signature characteristic of Neoism:

It uses 'ready-made' ideas. It does not necessarily have to invent a form. But the form that has already been used can be re-used by Neoism and turned into something else. If you look at the principles of Neoism actually you can immediately see that inventions are old and boring. The Neoists don't want to invent things, the Neoists want to apply things better than anyone else. Originality,

uniqueness and the term 'new' are not what's important anymore. What is important is that we completely recycle all the ideas that already exist, as if somebody had recycled the whole of the 20th century."¹⁰

The Neoist virus was to spread far beyond Montreal through Kántor's use of the international correspondence art network. Thus, another open system of art and communication was utilized as an economical means to distribute Neoist propaganda and to cultivate further recruits. One other method influenced by Kántor's Eastern European experience was the initiation of Neoist Apartment Festivals in order to bring Neoists together for concentrated periods of time, during which participants created Neoist environments through assorted performances, actions and activities. Apartment Festivals took place in Montreal, Baltimore, New York, London and Italy. It was at the 8th Apartment Festival in 1984 in London, that a young British cultural worker and critic, Stewart Home, was to meet face-to-face with the Canadian and American Neoists for the first time. Home's own journey through avant-garde music and art had led him to conceive of some ideas very similar to the Neoists, and he became part of the movement. However, within a year, and just before attending the 9th Apartment Festival in Ponte Nossa, Italy, Home publicly announced his break with Neoism. For Home this would be a productive split, and as he wrote in his 1985, *Open Letter to the Neoist network and the public at large*, "Ultimately what all neoists should aim for is an acrimonious split with the movement. To leave neoism is to realize it."¹¹

Home had a couple of important critiques of Neoism. Firstly, he accused Kántor of becoming over-identified with the Monty Cantsin identity, and thus diminishing the revolutionary potential of this strategy. And secondly, he felt that there was a lack of clarity and rigor in Neoism's theoretical position, in particular a lack of texts, an essential element in the construction of the historical avant-garde. Another, more ambitious reason for his split was his desire to re-author Neoism as an authentic avant-garde movement, initiate the process of its historicisation, and thus prepare it (and by implication himself) for entry into the academy. Home set about filling in Neoism's "in-between" by linking Neoism to the histories of Situationism and Fluxus, and for historical avant-garde precedents he wrote that Neoism is "an illegible note that Tristan Tzara allowed to fall from his breast pocket prior to a performance at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916."¹²

It is to two of Home's strategies for the reconstitution of Neoism that, in the context of this conference, I want to address here. Firstly, Home's recognition of the lack of a textual foundation to Neoism mirrors academic research into the role of texts within avant-garde movements, leading one Dada scholar to write:

...it is worth examining the proposition that the text is, in one or usually more respects, a prerequisite for the very concept of the avant-garde as we have come to know it in the early twentieth century.¹³

Not unrelated to Home's "break" with Neoism was his developing interest in using plagiarism as an artistic technique in order to explore identical themes that Neoism was examining, but in a more systematic and rigorous manner. This neo-plagiarist approach did not attempt to hide its *modus operandi*, as a traditional plagiarist would attempt to do, in fact the opposite was the whole point of the exercise. By elevating plagiarism into a *positive* artistic technique it flushed out into the open a number of associated concepts that previously had been viewed as the prerogatives of Capital itself. Individuality, artistic genius, originality, and by implication ownership and copyright, are the most obvious structures that capitalism cultivates in order generate value, and thus monetary and economic power. Neoism sought to subvert this monolith with anti-individual and collective strategies as a means to negate the commodification and mythification of both art and artist. For Home, the use of this neo-plagiarist strategy within the field of literature fitted perfectly with his wish to expand the textual base of Neoism in order to bolster its avant-garde credentials. In the following text Home extols some of the advantages of neo-plagiarism:

The great advantage of plagiarism as a literary method is that it removes the need for talent, and even much application. All you really need to do is select what to plagiarise. Enthusiastic beginners might like to start by plagiarising this article on plagiarism. A purist will choose to plagiarise it verbatim; but those who feel the need to express the creative side of their personality will change a word here and there, or re-arrange the order of the paragraphs.¹⁴

Home would continue to propagandize the benefits of neo-plagiarism and this activity would culminate in a series of Festivals of Plagiarism that took place during 1988 and 1989 in England, Scotland, USA and Germany. It should also be observed that the practice of both plagiarism and neo-plagiarism in whatever field it occurs, constitutes a collage practice in which a mixture of pre-existing and new elements are joined together to form a new composition.

Home cemented his break with Neoism, and in a direct challenge to Kántor created a new counter-multiple name as an "other" to Monty Cantsin, in the form of Karen Eliot. Karen Eliot was "materialized" in the summer of 1985 and Home was careful to dissuade participants from using the name in their personal lives, since this could lead to an over-identification of particular individuals with this name. He stated:

Anyone can become Karen Eliot simply by adopting the name, but they are only Karen Eliot for the period in which the name is used...When one becomes Karen Eliot one's previous existence consists of the acts other people have undertaken using the name...Karen Eliot was...constructed as a means of entering the shifting terrain that circumscribes the 'individual' and society.¹⁵

In February 1984, two months before the 8th Apartment Festival in London, Home publishes the first issue of a magazine called *Smile*.¹⁶ The genesis of the magazine was to propagate the ideas he was developing before his introduction to Neoism.

However, by the 5th issue of *Smile* in October of the same year he was encouraging readers to adopt the multiple name aesthetic, and for everybody to publish a magazine called *Smile*. This cross-pollination of the multiple name concept into the field of magazine publishing can be seen, in retrospect, as Home's most "original" contribution to the Neoist movement.

This initiative struck a responsive chord amongst fellow Neoists, and between 1984 and 1989, over 100 issues were published by approximately 30 editors across 3 continents (USA/Canada, Europe & Australia). Each individual *Smile* reflected the interests and concerns of the particular editor, with some *Smile*'s taken up exclusively with reproducing neo-plagiarist texts about Neoism and at the other end of the spectrum some were Neoist in title only. It's interesting to note that some of the most widely reproduced texts were those written by Home and credited either to Monty Cantsin or Karen Eliot's. Through *Smile*, Home had constructed a self-perpetuating mechanism whereby he not only significantly expanded the textual foundation of Neoism but this activity also positioned him as a central "author" in Neoism's reconstitution as a genuine avant-garde. *Smile* magazine, perhaps more than any other artifact produced within the Neoist milieu, gave shape to and reflected the kaleidoscope of interests that intersected under the Neoist umbrella.

Smile was also a key instrument with which Home challenged Kántor's leadership of Neoism, and as a means to position himself as Neoism's key theorist. Deeply embedded in Home's pursuit of the latter is the utilization of a collage as a strategy within his larger plan. Neo-plagiarism, particularly its literary form, is based upon a collage technique, and multiple names constitute identity through an accumulative and ever-expanding collage of actions performed under the chosen name. *Smile* magazine itself can only be properly conceptualized as a vast collage of its constituent parts.

One of the more immediate results of Home's tactics was a small exhibition held between March and August, 1992, in the National Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and titled "SMILE: A Magazine of Multiple Origins." The exhibition featured over 100 issues from *Smile*'s heroic years (1984-1989). This institutional recognition from the academy would seem to confirm Home's success in his reconstitution of Neoism as a genuine avant-garde, as well as affirming his own carefully constructed role, one that he summarized in a 1986 article as, "Theorists start out as authors and end up as authorities."¹⁷

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Footnotes

1. *French Dictionary*, 3rd edition. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.
2. Flynt, Henry. "Mutations of the Vanguard: Pre-Fluxus, During Fluxus, Late Fluxus," in Oliva, Bonita, Gino Di Maggio and Gianni Sassi, (eds), *Ubi Fluxus, ibi Motus* (catalogue), Milan: Edition Gabriele Mazzotta, 1990, p. 99.
3. tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE, letter to the author, January 1999.
4. Pain, Paddy. "Stewart Home," (interview) in, *Kinokaze*, #2, 1993, p. 23.
5. Pain, Paddy. "István Kántor," (interview) in, *Kinokaze*, #2, 1993, p. 17.
6. Cantsin, Monty (ed). "Letter to Grauf Haufen, June 1986," In: *Neoism Now*, Berlin: Neoist Propaganda Institute, 1987, no pagination.
7. Pain, Paddy. "István Kántor," (interview) in, *Kinokaze*, #2, 1993, p. 18.
8. Home, Stewart (ed). *Smile*, #6, 1984, p. 4
9. Pernecky, Geza. *The Magazine Network*, Soft Geometry: Koln, 1993, p. 157.
10. Pain, Paddy. "István Kántor," (interview) in, *Kinokaze*, #2, 1993, p. 18.
11. Home, Stewart. "Open letter to the neoist network and the public at large," *Smile*, #8, 1985, p. 1.
12. Home, Stewart (ed). *Smile*, #7, 1985, p. 5.
13. Foster, Stephen. "The Prerequisite Text." In: *Visible Language*, XX, 3/4, Summer/Autumn, 1987, p. 319.
14. Home, Stewart (ed). *Plagiarism: Art as Commodity and Strategies for its Negation*. London: Aporia Press, 1987, p. 5.
15. Home, Stewart. *Neoism, Plagiarism & Praxis*. Edinburgh/San Francisco: AK Press, 1995, p. 11.
16. Home coined the name in response to the Canadian group General Idea and their magazine *File*. See: Home, Stewart. *Neo-(H)-Istory*. In: Cantsin, Monty (ed). *Neoism Now*, Berlin: Neoist Propaganda Institute, 1987, no pagination.
17. Home, Stewart. "From Author to Authority." *Smile*, #9, 1986, p. 14.